

UNDERSTANDING THE IDEA OF 'ALTERNATIVE POLITICS' IN INDIA

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The study and analysis of political parties has evolved gradually as an important sub-field in the discipline of political science and such a study of the nature of the political parties is known as 'Stasiology' (coined by the French Sociologist Maurice Duverger). World over we have many works that delved deep in to the evolution and history of political parties, their success and failures. But, unfortunately the works on various political parties so far have not concentrated much on the nature of the political parties which employs sociological understanding. J.C. Johari opines that despite the existence of many conceptual problems, much progress has been made in the study of political parties and helped in refining the discipline of stasiology.

The current article tries to look in to the evolution of the Aam Aadmi Party which has the aim of ushering in 'alternative politics' in the Indian democratic landscape. Especially it tries to analyze the concept of Alternative Politics from the perspective of political theory as well as from the view point of political parties and other civil society organizations which claims to work for establishing alternative politics in India.

India inspired by her protracted and grueling freedom struggle adopted multi party democracy after independence which aims to keep people at the centre of the governance. Many countries especially the western countries were very skeptical about the success of the democratic experiment in most diverse country like India which is not just a nation but a nation of nations. But, India proved all the theories of the west wrong and today the world point its finger at India to show an example of vibrant democracy.

India has disproved the widely acknowledged political theories like Duverger's Law. Duverger's Law asserts that 'first past the post' method of electoral system tend to favor a two-party system. India despite having the first past the post system could nurture and develop multi-party system though it appeared to be one party dominant system or congress system in the first two decades of independence as coined by Rajni Kothari. The present democratic setup we have today has developed over a time after undergoing some painful experiences like hegemonic dominance by a single party for over three decades, Emergency period of 1970s , Unviable and unstable coalition governments etc.,. Indian democracy has undergone a metamorphosis to achieve the present state of democratic polity as a chrysalis undergoes before transforming itself in to a beautiful butterfly. But, we must not ignore the fact that the transformation is not complete and perfect .We have millions of miles to march ahead to realize the true idea of democratic government. May be we are in the crawling stage of our democratic experiments and we must learn and experiment a lot to walk and run to achieve the ultimate ideals of a democratic polity and republic.

One of the interesting experiments that are happening in the Indian democratic setup in the recent past is the quest for alterative politics among the emerging political parties and many civil society organizations. The idea of alternative politics gained momentum due to the failure of the existing political parties in fulfilling the aspirations of the people who vote them to power. Advocates of the alternative politics call such parties as main stream parties or conventional or traditional parties. They argue that these parties have twisted the idea of democratic polity and limited the goal of political parties just to capture power to run the government. The governance they provide is not citizen centric. People under the governance of the traditional political parties have lost their say. People of this country have become subjects of a bureaucratic administrative setup which is contrary to the principles of a democratic government. It is under these circumstances that the idea of alternative politics has gained currency which promises true democracy keeping people at the centre of governance process.

For a long time the voter has elected the lesser evil because the best is not available. The magnitude of voters preferring NOTA (None of the above) in the Electronic Voting Machines is growing. This testifies the fact that the people are disillusioned with the choices they are provided with. This is encouraging the organizations and political parties which aim to provide altogether new meaning to the political establishment in India.

The idea of alternatives to the existing political structure is not an altogether new one. Long back eminent political scientists like Rajni Kothari emphasized the need for alternative models of governance for a lively and vibrant democracy. Think tanks like Centre for the study of Developing Societies stressed the need for strong and active civil society to make the elected governments accountable to people. The Aam Aadmi Party phenomenon in the Delhi legislative assembly election (2013, 2015) has pumped in more energy and enthusiasm to various organizations and political parties that are working with the aim of ushering in new kind of politics in India.

Before trying to understand the Aam Aadmi Party phenomenon and its effects on Indian democratic political structure it is important to understand the meaning of the term 'Alternative Politics' as perceived by emerging parties and civil society organizations. Alternative politics is a determination to work with the bottom-up approach rather than top-down and a commitment to politics as peoples' work. It opposes the idea of governance that is limited to the bureaucratized and professional activity restricted to a paid class of persons set apart from the common people of the country. It makes strong pitch for decentralization decision making apparatus in the governance. It aims at overhauling the politics and political structures of the country. It is not about seizure of power. It is about transferring power to people. Its emphasis is on swaraj which means self-rule which is the ultimate goal of any democratic setup. Preachers of the idea of alternative politics are trying to exhort the social activists, NGOs in to the competitive politics as they are closely associated with people and their problems. The Aam Aadmi Party experiment is a perfect example of an NGO tuning in to a successful political party.

The idea of Alternative Politics should not be confused with the terms like political alternatives and alternatives to politics. Political alternative is just about one party capturing power defeating other party. Alternatives to politics are something which goes against the very idea of democracy. People and institutions which propagate the idea of alternatives to politics also talks of transformation and change in the society. They also talk of transferring power to people which is highly desired in any democratic frame work. But, the problem of this idea is that they wish to work out this transformation outside the framework of our constitution. The maoist or naxalbari movements are the best examples of organizations that aim to work for alternatives to politics. Indian society had long back rejected the idea of alternative to politics.

Though there has been many experiments in the direction of alternative politics, the electoral success of Aam Aadmi Party has caught the imagination of a nation. The party was born out of an extra-ordinary anti-corruption movement which galvanized the entire nation. The demand of the movement was to bring in a Lok Pal bill that helps to end the endemic corruption in the system. The then government questioned the authenticity of the unelected people to dictate an elected government to pass laws as desired by them. Some of the leaders in the movement started understanding the limitations of such social movements in cleansing the system that has rotten to a great depth. They believed that unless a political force with a new agenda does not come up, their idea of promoting an alternative political culture would never be realized. This is the back ground with which a party called the Aam Aadmi Party emerged. Urban middle class and educated intellectuals who usually are apathetic to politics started taking interest in the politics of the country. Thousands of young professionals started sacrificing their careers to work for the new party that has alternative politics as its agenda. Though Delhi was the epicenter of this political activity, lakhs of volunteers across the country started pouring in their support for the new party as never before. It was a common man's party in a real sense as it was born out of the people who wished to see a real change in the politics of the country. All this support materialized and the Aam Aadmi Party proved itself to be a first successful experiment in alternative politics by winning 67 seats of 70 legislative assembly seats with a vote share of 54.3% (assembly elections-2015). The results of the election itself speak of the scope that a true political party which aims to work for alternative politics in this country has. In fact even before the Aam Aadmi Party we have debut political parties like Telugu Desam Party (Andhra Pradesh), Asom Gana Parishad (Assam) etc. which clocked spectacular results in the very first elections they contested. But, they could not kindle the hopes of change and transformation in the entire political structure of the country as they were confined to specific regions and specific issues only. Unlike these debut parties the Aam Aadmi Party was founded with the agenda of spreading the idea of alternative politics across the country rising above the politics of the cast, region, religion etc.

The Aam Aadmi Party has recently completed one year of successful governance in Delhi. Many surveys and reports say that the level of corruption in Delhi has come down because of the new initiatives like anti-corruption help line. There is more transparency in the system of governance. One of the recent schemes that caught the imagination of the nation was the Odd-Even scheme for vehicles that was introduced to reduce pollution in Delhi, which is the world most polluted city. Adventures like implementing Odd-Even scheme would not have been initiated by the conventional political parties. The party's referendum on whether to form a coalition government with the support of the congress party after the elections in 2013 is altogether a new way of conducting politics in our country. Fighting elections on the basis of area specific manifestoes is a new phenomenon in Indian politics. Its experiment in conducting Janata darbars and mohalla sabhas though failed to reach the expectations of the party and people, it should be understood as an adventure in the path of realizing the idea of alternative politics. The structure and functioning of the Aam Aadmi Party fits in to the definition of a 'Mass party' as defined by Maurice Duverger. To Duverger a mass party is one that survives on the subscription fee of the members. It tries to enroll more and more people and replaces the capitalist financing of electioneering by democratic financing.

While new political parties with a vision of affecting alternative politics in our political setup are important, one should not ignore the role of civil society and many NGOs in realizing this goal. Institutions and social movements like Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Kisan Mazdoor Shakti Sangathan, Parivarthan, National Campaign for People's Right to information, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Centre for Good Governance, National Election Watch, Association for Democratic Reforms, Centre for Good Governance, Swaraj Abhiyan etc.,. These institutions and social movements have laid strong foundations for building alternative politics in the country. The Aam Aadmi Party's experiment is motivating and inspiring all such movements and institutions to take plunge in to the competitive politics to realize the dream of alternative politics. NGOs and social activists today are not trying to be apolitical.

Theoretically it is difficult to define the true definition of the idea of 'Alternative Politics'. Scholars have different opinions about this idea. There are many ways of understanding and defining the idea of alternative politics. The term 'Alternative politics' gained currency with the electoral success of the Aam Aadmi party. The idea will evolve further with the passage of time and contribute to the further enrichment of our democratic polity. Though there are various definitions and thoughts regarding the term alternative politics almost all agree with its ultimate aim of democratizing the electoral process and governance in which ordinary citizens have their say.

Seven decades is very short period for any nation. But, with in this short span of time India has sustained and safeguarded the idea of democracy despite the crises it faced socially, economically and politically in its sixty nine years of independence. It belied all the pessimism that was spread against India during the time of national emergency. The toughest leaders of the country were forced to go to ordinary people to seek power. From the phase of one party dominance or congress system it evolved into multi-party democracy and recently has taken a step in the direction of alternative politics which promises to realize the idea of democracy in a true sense of the word i.e., rule by the people.

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